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TWO CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS

Richard Kraut

I

In this paper, I want to contrast two ways of judging whether people are leading happy lives: Aristotle's and our own. I will argue that there are some striking similarities between these two conceptions of happiness. To live happily, for both Aristotle and for us, is to have certain attitudes towards one's life, and to measure up to certain standards. Where we and Aristotle sharply disagree is over the standards to be used in evaluating lives. Roughly, he insists on an objective and stringent standard, whereas our test is more subjective and flexible. I will also argue that we have good reason to reject his conception of happiness, for his standards can be employed only by those who know things we do not. If we ever acquired such knowledge, we might make judgments about happiness that are like the ones Aristotle makes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We would, in other words, drop our present conception of happiness and adopt something like his.

The approach I am taking to this subject differs from the usual one. Scholars and philosophers who study the *Ethics* often claim that Aristotle has no conception of happiness at all, in our sense of the word. They notice that when his term *eudaimonia* receives the traditional translation, "happiness," a number of his points sound dubious and even silly. For example, he is made to say that everything should be sought for the sake of happiness, and that children and evil adults are never happy because they have not developed such traits as justice, courage, and self-control. Furthermore, *eudaimonia* does not name a feeling or emotion, whereas we think that happiness is, or at least involves, a certain state of mind. And so we are warned, for example, by Henry Sidgwick, that the word "happiness" that we find in translations of Aristotle does not have its contemporary meaning in English.¹ Occasionally a different translation is proposed:

¹ *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (London, 1907), pp. 92-93.

W. D. Ross suggests “well-being”² (despite the fact that he sticks to “happiness” in the Oxford edition of the *Ethics*); John Cooper proposes “flourishing.”³ The idea is that we should assign a meaning to *eudaimonia* that makes Aristotle disagree with us as little as possible. Since we believe that some children definitely are happy, and that some evil people might very well be, Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* cannot mean “happiness” in its usual sense.

I think this approach rests on an oversimplified view both of happiness and of *eudaimonia*. Sidgwick makes the dubious claim that our term is “commonly used in Bentham’s way as convertible with Pleasure.”⁴ Ross tells us that “‘happiness’ means a state of feeling, differing from ‘pleasure’ only by its suggestion of permanence, depth and serenity.”⁵ And Cooper says that it “tends to be taken as referring exclusively to a subjective psychological state.”⁶ The common error here is the belief that the only thing we mean when we judge a person happy is that he is in a certain state of mind. As I will argue, we often mean something more than this: we are saying that the individual is happy because his life meets a certain standard (a subjective one). Furthermore, when Aristotle calls someone *eudaimon*, he means not only that the individual meets a certain standard (an objective one), but that he is in a certain state of mind—the very same state we say people are in when we call them happy. To think that happiness just involves a psychological condition and that *eudaimonia* does not is to get both concepts wrong.

It is an illusion, at any rate, to think that we foster a better understanding of Aristotle if we use “well-being” or “flourish-

² Aristotle: *A Complete Exposition of His Works and Thought*, Meridian edn. (Cleveland, 1959), p. 186. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from the Ross translation.

³ *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975), pp. 89–90, n. 1. Cooper says that “happiness” is not a good translation since “much that Aristotle says about *eudaimonia* manifestly fails to hold true of happiness as ordinarily understood.” (Ibid.) To support this point, he calls attention to Aristotle’s claim at 1100a1–4 that a child can be called *eudaimon* only in the expectation that he will achieve *eudaimonia* as an adult.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 92.

⁵ Op. cit., p. 186.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 89, n. 1.

ing” as translations of *eudaimonia*, rather than “happiness.” If we use these words, Aristotle will be made to say that children and evil men do not attain well-being, or do not flourish. Are these claims any more plausible than the ones they are supposed to replace? If a young tree can flourish in the right conditions, why not a young person?⁷ Why say that well-being is beyond the reach of children and evil people? Certainly we do things for their well-being—don’t we ever succeed?

We could of course leave *eudaimonia* untranslated and let its meaning be gathered from the statements Aristotle makes about it. But that would leave unanswered a question I think we should ask: When we say that a person is leading a happy life, and Aristotle says that the same person is not *eudaimon*, do we have anything to argue about? I think we do. As I will try to show, the conception of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is best interpreted as a challenge to the way we go about judging people to be happy. If we were convinced that what Aristotle says about *eudaimonia* is true, we would no longer believe that children or

⁷ It would be desirable, in translating Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*, to find an English expression that plays pretty much the same role in our language that *eudaimonia* played in his. On this score, “flourishing” is quite inadequate:

A. *Eudaimon* and its cognates were everyday words that occurred frequently not only in philosophical works, but also in Greek drama, oratory and poetry. Our term “flourishing” is less common. If a student in a philosophy course were asked, “What is human flourishing?” his first reaction would be that this is a philosopher’s question that has no obvious connection with ordinary life. But when Aristotle asked in his classroom what *eudaimonia* is, his audience immediately recognized this as a common and urgent practical question. (In this respect, asking “what is happiness?” is very much like asking what *eudaimonia* is.)

B. When “flourishing” is used in common speech, it is most often attached to nonhuman subjects: ant colonies, flowers, towns, businesses, etc., are much more likely to be called flourishing than human beings. *Eudaimonia*, on the other hand, is attributed only to human and divine persons. (Notice how odd it would be to say that an animal or plant is leading a happy life. Though dogs and cats can be happy, they still do not lead happy lives; the latter expression has pretty much the same range of application as *eudaimonia*.)

C. When human beings are said to flourish, it is often meant that they flourish in a certain role or activity. For example: artists do not flourish in military dictatorships, pornographers flourish in democracies, and evil men flourish when moral standards are too lax or too strict. Roughly what is meant is that they succeed in these roles under the conditions specified. This common use of the term “flourish” is far from Aristotle’s use of *eudaimonia*. When he says that an evil man cannot be *eudaimon* under any conditions, he is hardly denying that evil can flourish.

evil people can be happy. And if we began to make judgments of happiness in the way he makes judgments of *eudaimonia*, we would not be changing the meaning of “happiness.”

II

Aristotle thinks that the most *eudaimon* individual is someone who has fully developed and regularly exercises the various virtues of the soul, both intellectual and moral. Such a person engages in philosophical activity (since this is the full flowering of his capacity to reason theoretically) and also in moral activities, which display his justice, generosity, temperance, etc. Though he may experience minor mishaps, he cannot have recently suffered any severe misfortunes, such as the death of close friends or dearly loved children. Aristotle thinks that a virtuous person will make the best of any situation, but that in extreme circumstances *eudaimonia* is lost. It may be regained, but only after a long period of time during which many fine things have been achieved.⁸

Consider such a person—a philosopher and a good man—at a time of life that is not marred by misfortunes. Aristotle thinks he would in these conditions be as *eudaimon* as any human being can be. I want to ask: is he a happy person? Is he in the same psychological state as any individual who is leading a happy life? When we say that someone is living happily, we imply that he has certain attitudes towards his life: he is very glad to be alive; he judges that on balance his deepest desires are being satisfied and that the circumstances of his life are turning out well. Does Aristotle’s paradigm of *eudaimonia* have these same attitudes? I think so. For such a person loves the activities he regularly and successfully engages in. He thinks that exercising one’s intellectual and moral capacities is the greatest good available to human beings, and he knows he possesses this

⁸ This paragraph summarizes views Aristotle puts forward in several parts of the *Ethics*: I 7 1097b22–1098a20 (the function of man is to act virtuously); I 8 1099a31–1099b7 and I 9 1100a5–9 (the misfortunes that can spoil *eudaimonia*); I 10 1100b22–1101a13 (only major misfortunes take *eudaimonia* away, and it can be recovered); X 7–8 (the best life is philosophical). See “Aristotle on the Ideal Life” (unpublished) for my defense of the view that for Aristotle the best life combines both philosophical and ethical activities.

good.⁹ Furthermore, he has all the other major goods he wants. His desire for such external goals as honor, wealth, and physical pleasure is moderate, and should be easy enough to satisfy in a normal life.¹⁰ If, however, some great misfortune does occur—if, for example, he is totally deprived of honor—then Aristotle insists that he is no longer *eudaimon*.¹¹ So, the individual who is most *eudaimon* on Aristotle's theory passes our tests for happiness with flying colors. All his major goals are being achieved, to a degree that satisfies him. Knowing this, he greatly enjoys his life and has nothing serious to complain of.

Furthermore, there is a passage in which Aristotle explicitly tells us how a *eudaimon* individual will look upon his life. It occurs in the midst of an involved proof that whoever is *eudaimon* needs friends: "All men desire (life), and particularly those who are good and supremely happy (*makarios*), for to such men life is most desirable, and their existence is the most supremely

⁹ As is well known, the virtuous individual does not merely act virtuously: he also chooses such acts for their own sake (II 4 1105a30–32), prefers them to everything else (I 10 1100b19–20), and realizes he is a good person (IX 9 1170b4–9).

¹⁰ For the view that ethical virtue requires moderate desires for external goods, see esp. III 4 1119a11–20 and VII 4 1148a22–1148b4. Aristotle's doctrine that every ethical virtue lies in a mean between two extremes should be distinguished from his belief that desires for external objects should be moderate in strength, though he himself may run these two theses together. For some brief discussion, see J. Urmson, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (July, 1973), esp. pp. 225–226.

¹¹ "Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense" (VII 13 1153b19–21). Aristotle presumably does not mean that a brief experience of great physical pain, whatever its cause, is incompatible with *eudaimonia*. Otherwise, pains endured in honorable battle would also deprive someone of *eudaimonia*. No doubt, he is thinking of the rack as an instrument of punishment and therefore disgrace; the victim not only suffers pain, but also a severe loss of honor. To put the point more generally: Some external goods, like honor, are so important that they must be present, to some moderate degree, in any *eudaimon* life, and this is why severe deprivation of such goods is incompatible with *eudaimonia*. Such goods will be desired moderately by whoever understands what *eudaimonia* is, and so those who achieve *eudaimonia* will fully satisfy their desires for these major external goals. If Aristotle had held (1) that a virtuous individual can have ravenous appetites for external goods, and (2) if he had continued to hold that a *eudaimon* life need only contain a moderate amount of such goods, then (3) he would have to accept the conclusion that a *eudaimon* individual can want much more than he has.

happy (*makariōtatē*)” (1170a26–29). To put it somewhat differently: one who is good and highly *eudaimon* has an especially strong desire for life, and this psychological condition is based on the perception of how very desirable his life is. Now, when Aristotle says that one who is virtuous and *eudaimon* particularly desires life, he cannot mean that he will struggle to stay alive at any cost. Rather, he must mean that such individuals are more glad to be alive than others; the kind of existence they enjoy gives them a heightened love of life. As Aristotle says elsewhere (1117b9–13), these are the people who have the most reason to live, and therefore the thought of death—even death in battle—is especially painful to them. In their attitude towards themselves and their lives, they are the very opposite of the sort of individual who is so miserable and filled with self-hatred that he contemplates suicide (1166b11–28). It is undeniable, then, that the *eudaimon* individual, as Aristotle depicts him, is fully satisfied with his life. He is, in other words, a happy person.

There is another way of arriving at this same conclusion. Let us for the moment ignore Aristotle’s belief that *eudaimonia* consists in virtuous activity. He has many other convictions about the *eudaimon* life besides this one, and from these alone we can infer that whoever is *eudaimon* must be happy with his life. Consider the following points, all of which Aristotle affirms or presupposes: We human beings are different from plants, in that we would never be able to attain our good with any regularity, unless we had effective desires for what we think is worthwhile. Since we are creatures with strong desires for the good, as we variously conceive it, it is natural and inevitable for us to develop a deep interest in whether or not such desires are being satisfied. An animal with first-order desires, but no strong second-order interest in whether those first-order desires are being fulfilled, would not be fully human. Put otherwise: no person would choose a life in which he remains continually unaware of whether or not he possesses the good; that would be a life befitting plants, not human beings.¹² Now, any deep desire

¹² Aristotle says in a number of places that a life of continual slumber is one no human being would choose, since it is the life of a plant. See *Eudemian Ethics* I 5 1216a2–6; *NE* I 5 1095b32–35, X 6 1176a34–35. The distinction between plants and animals lies in the latter’s ability to perceive (*De Anima*

which develops naturally and universally is a desire which must be satisfied, if we are to attain our good. Satisfying that desire is in fact part of our good.¹³ So a major human good is the second-order good which consists in the perception that our major first-order desires are being satisfied. And this second-order good is one we must have in order to be *eudaimon*, since a *eudaimon* life can have no serious deficiency (1097b14–15). Even if someone correctly understood his good and attained it, he still would not be *eudaimon*, if he mistakenly thought that he lacked a major part of that good. For example, suppose someone whose family is living abroad is told that they have recently been killed. Let us assume that he is deeply affected, and views his loss as a great tragedy. Even if he should discover, after a year's time, that he was misinformed, that his family has all this time been alive and well, it remains true that he lacked *eudaimonia* during that year.¹⁴ His life may in fact have possessed every first-order good that a well-lived life requires; still, it undeniably contained a serious second-order evil. To think, over a long period of time, that dear friends or family members have recently died, is by itself a major misfortune. For it involves the perception—or, in the case imagined, the misperception—that one lacks a great

II 2 413b1-2, *NE* IX 9 1070a16-17); in sleep, one becomes plant-like, since perception ceases. Therefore, one of the capacities we must take advantage of, if we are to lead lives that are not plant-like, is perception. And what one presumably wants to perceive are the goods available to higher beings: the good things in one's own life, in the lives of friends and one's city, and in the fixed nature of the universe. Merely to perceive the sorts of things that other animals can detect is to escape the condition of a plant, but it is not to lead a distinctively human life (I 7 1098a1-3).

¹³ Thus Aristotle says that pleasure is a good since all human beings desire it (X 2 1172b35-1173a4). In fact, it is so pervasive a feature of human life that all men "weave pleasure into their ideal of happiness" (VII 13 1153b14-15). Aristotle's own theory of *eudaimonia* also finds an important place for this good (I 8 1099a7-29). In general, anything that is deeply and universally desired must be part of our good.

¹⁴ Aristotle, of course, never discusses such an example. My point is that he has beliefs which commit him to denying that the individual described is *eudaimon*. Anyone who doubts this should recall Aristotle's view that one must have practical wisdom to be *eudaimon*. Judging from his discussion of this virtue in Book VI, it is doubtful that he would ascribe it to those who have radically mistaken beliefs about their own well being. Notice especially the connection between practical wisdom and understanding (VI 10), and the importance of recognizing specific matters of fact (1141b15 ff., 1142a20 ff.).

good, and this in itself is a great evil. *Eudaimonia* involves the recognition that one's desire for the good is being fulfilled, and therefore one who attains *eudaimonia* is necessarily happy with his life. His deepest desires are being satisfied, and realizing this, he has an especially affirmative attitude towards himself and his life.¹⁵

Notice that in reaching this conclusion, no appeal was made to Aristotle's theory that the best life is devoted to virtuous activity. So, if the argument I have just reconstructed is correct, then all of the various and conflicting theories of the good life ought to recognize that a *eudaimon* individual, whatever else may be true of him, has a certain attitude toward his life. Even if one disagrees with Aristotle about the importance of virtue, that is no reason for denying the connection between *eudaimonia* and the perceived satisfaction of major desires. For that connection depends solely on some highly general features of human nature, and the point that a *eudaimon* life is without major defects. Therefore, any adequate theory of the best human life—whether it identifies the good with honor or pleasure or virtue—ought to characterize a *eudaimon* individual as someone who knowingly satisfies his deepest desires. Furthermore, if *eudaimonia* and desire-satisfaction are connected in the way described, then there is a fair empirical test by which competing theories of *eudaimonia* can be partially evaluated. If the individuals who are pronounced *eudaimones* by a certain theory of *eudaimonia* believe there is little reason to be alive, and are

¹⁵ The connection between *eudaimonia* and desire-satisfaction is tacitly assumed at the beginning of *Eudemian Ethics* I 5: "While there are many different things as to which it is not easy to make a right judgment, this is especially the case with one about which everybody thinks that it is easy to judge and anybody can decide—the question which of the things contained in being alive is preferable and which when attained would fully satisfy a man's desire" (1215b15-18, tr. by H. Rackham, emphasis added). Obviously, the deceptively simple question posed here is a stand-in for the one Aristotle has been raising in the first four chapters of the *Eudemian Ethics*: "Which sort of life is most *eudaimon*?" Since Aristotle regards them as equivalent questions, he is presupposing that a life cannot be *eudaimon* unless it fully satisfies the desires of one who leads it. I take him to be talking about major desires—that is, long-standing desires which have great weight in determining how one conducts one's life. Small mishaps cannot deprive one of *eudaimonia* (*NE* I 10 1100b22-25), and the failure to satisfy a minor desire is a small mishap, at most.

given to thoughts of suicide, then that theory cannot be right. Contrariwise, if those who are pronounced *eudaimones* have a highly positive attitude towards their lives, and those who are alleged to be quite distant from *eudaimonia* are deeply dissatisfied with themselves, then that is some confirmation for the theory which reaches this result. A theory of *eudaimonia*, in other words, ought to harmonize, at least partly,¹⁶ with the way people feel about their lives: that is the upshot of our argument linking *eudaimonia* and the perception that one's major desires are being fulfilled. And Aristotle can claim that his own particular theory, which connects *eudaimonia* with virtuous activity, satisfies this requirement. For, as we have seen, he thinks that the virtuous and *eudaimon* individual is especially glad to be alive, whereas the individual who most sorely lacks *eudaimonia*—the evil man, hated for his misdeeds—is given to thoughts of suicide.

Let me emphasize two points about my interpretation. First, I have not said that the word *eudaimon*, by virtue of its everyday meaning, could only have been applied to satisfied individuals. Perhaps, as K. J. Dover claims, a Greek could have applied that term, without irony or contradiction, to a person who was deeply dissatisfied with his life.¹⁷ What I want to emphasize is that Dover's thesis about ordinary Greek usage does not conflict with my own thesis about Aristotle. The *Nicomachean Ethics* does not merely record linguistic conventions about the term *eudaimon*, and in many ways Aristotle's treatment of this subject is controversial. His idea that *eudaimonia* consists in contemplation, for example, is no part of the meaning of the word *eudaimonia*, but is instead a product of philosophical argument. Similarly, the psychological condition presupposed by Ar-

¹⁶ I say "at least partly" because Aristotle leaves open the possibility that some lack *eudaimonia* even though they perceive that their deepest desires are satisfied. Consider, for example, a person who is not evil, but who values honor, wealth, and physical pleasure more than they are worth. Because of these defective desires, he is not a virtuous person, and he therefore lacks *eudaimonia*. Yet he might be fully satisfied with his life. Satisfaction of desire is not a sufficient condition of *eudaimonia*, but even so a theory of *eudaimonia* is dubious if it fails to correspond roughly with experience. The most important cases are at the extremes: individuals deemed *eudaimones* or *athlioi* (miserable) ought to have opposite attitudes towards their lives.

¹⁷ *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 1974), p. 174, and n. 5.

istotle—that *eudaimonia* requires full and conscious satisfaction of desire—is a product of his own reflections, and need not have been a linguistic convention or a matter of universal agreement. So if we ever find among Greek authors genuine cases in which a deeply dissatisfied individual is called *eudaimon*, we merely will have discovered an application of that term against which Aristotle would protest, just as he protests against those who call only the wealthy *eudaimones*.¹⁸

Second, I am not saying that, according to Aristotle, whoever perceives that his major desires are being satisfied is *eudaimon*. Complete fulfillment of desire is a necessary condition of *eudaimonia*, but not a sufficient one. For on Aristotle's theory, those desires must be directed at worthwhile goals, and they must be proportionate in strength to the value of those goals; otherwise, one is not *eudaimon*, however satisfied one feels. Now, it might be claimed that this is a striking difference between *eudaimonia* and happiness. If a person's desires are fully satisfied—so the claim goes—then he is happy; but, as I have just said, this condition is not sufficient, in Aristotle's eyes, for *eudaimonia*. And it might be said that this difference is enough to show that "happiness" is not a good translation of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. In the remaining sections of this paper, I will be presenting my reply to this line of argument. For now, I would like to stress the point that, however one wants to translate Aristotle's term *eudaimonia*, one ought to have a clear understanding of the similarities and differences between that notion and our notion of a happy life. And one remarkable similarity, which scholars

¹⁸ I doubt that Dover has found a genuine case. The lines he quotes, *ibid.*, n. 5, are *Medea* 598-9, but the context strongly suggests that Medea is being ironic: some *eudaimon* life that would be, filled with worry and distress! If that is how she is to be understood, then her lines tell us just the opposite of what Dover reads into them. Her mental anguish is precisely what makes it outrageous to call her *eudaimon*. I am grateful to Gregory Vlastos and Elizabeth Gebhard for discussion of this point. Dover admits that *eudaimonia* "occasionally requires the translation 'happiness'." *Ibid.* So even if this is a poor translation in many contexts and authors (and I am not convinced it is), it may still be the most suitable translation of Aristotle. Notice that closeness of meaning is not necessarily transitive. Our expression "leading a happy life" may be close in meaning to Aristotle's term *eudaimonia*, and his use of that term may be close to the way it is used by his contemporaries and predecessors; yet some of them may mean by *eudaimon* something that is not close to our expression "leading a happy life."

have not recognized,¹⁹ is this: A *eudaimon* individual, as Aristotle conceives him, is in the very same psychological state as a person who is living happily. Such individuals have a highly affirmative attitude towards their lives, since they perceive that their major desires are being fulfilled. In spite of the fact that “happiness” is the traditional translation of *eudaimonia*, one of the most important connections between the two concepts has curiously been ignored.²⁰

III

Let us take a closer look now at how we judge whether someone is happy. The following example will help focus our ideas: Suppose a man is asked what his idea of happiness is, and he replies, “Being loved, admired, or at least respected by my friends. But I would hate to have friends who only pretend to have these attitudes towards me. If they didn’t like me, I would want to know about it. Better to have no friends at all, and realize it, than to have false friends one cannot see through.” Suppose that what this man hates actually comes to pass. His so-called friends orchestrate an elaborate deception, giving him every reason to believe that they love and admire him, though in fact they don’t. And he is taken in by the illusion.

Is this a happy life? Is he a happy man? Some people will say

¹⁹ This parallel is not mentioned by any of those who specifically discuss the relationship between *eudaimonia* and happiness: J. Austin, “*Agathon and Eudaimonia* in the *Ethics* of Aristotle,” in J. Moravcsik (ed.), *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), pp. 261-296, esp. 270-283; H. Joachim, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford, 1951), p. 28; J. Ackrill, “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 1974, pp. 3-23, esp. 12-13; S. Clark, *Aristotle’s Man* (Oxford, 1975), p. 157; R. Sullivan, *Morality and the Good Life* (Memphis, 1977), p. 178; to which add the works of Sidgwick, Ross and Cooper, cited above in notes 1, 2, and 3.

²⁰ For an exception, see G. Watson, “Happiness and *Eudaimonia*,” read at the 1977 Princeton Colloquium on Aristotle’s *Ethics*; his argument differs from my own. Hobbes too seems to connect *eudaimonia* with happiness. He says, “That whereby (men) signify the opinion they have of a man’s felicity is by the Greeks called *makarismos*, for which we have no name in our tongue.” *Leviathan*, I 6, penultimate sentence. A *makarismos* is a claim that someone is *makarios* or (equivalently) *eudaimon*. So Hobbes is saying that when *A* calls *B* *eudaimon*: (1) *A* thinks *B*’s life is felicitous (i.e. happy), and (2) *A* is giving his opinion of (is praising or admiring) *B*’s happy life.

yes, without a moment's thought. On their view (which I will call "extreme subjectivism"), happiness is a psychological state and nothing more; it involves, among other things, the belief that one is getting the important things one wants, as well as certain pleasant affects that normally go along with this belief.²¹ So the deceived man is living just as happily as he would be if he were not deceived. Just as unfounded fear is still fear, so unfounded happiness is still happiness. For consider what we would say if the deceived man became suspicious of his friends, and came upon an opportunity to discover what they really think of him. Would we say that he is finding out whether he is really happy? Wouldn't it be more natural to say that he is finding out whether his happiness has been based on an illusion?

I think extreme subjectivism is a half-truth. Our reaction to the case of the deceived man is really more complicated than this doctrine admits. We do have some tendency to say that the deceived man is happy, but at the same time we have a definite reluctance to say this. The basis for our reluctance seems to be this: When a person is asked what his idea of happiness is, he quite naturally answers by describing the kind of life he would like to lead. It would therefore be misleading for the man in the above example to reply that he will be happy whether his friends deceive him or not. That would imply that he attaches some significant value to the situation in which he is deceived. Evidently, when we ask someone, "What will make you happy? What is your idea of happiness?", we are not requesting that he specify the conditions under which he will be in a certain psychological state. It is not like asking, "What will make you angry?" Rather, it is inquiring about the standards he imposes on himself, and the goals he is seeking. And this makes us hesi-

²¹ I do not intend extreme subjectivism to be naive in its view about what kind of psychological state happiness consists in. It would be naive if it held that a happy person is simply one who is, at the time, in a euphoric mood. That is far too simple and episodic an account: a happy person may be so occupied with challenging activities that he rarely experiences the sort of mood we call "feeling happy." The important thing about extreme subjectivism is that it endorses these views: when a person's conception of reality is utterly mistaken, that fact can never be the basis for denying that he is happy; even when someone deeply desires his conception of the world to be correct, his happiness does not require that desire to be satisfied; a person must be wrong if he says that his happiness depends on reality being a certain way.

tant to say that the deceived man is happy or has a happy life. Judged by his own standards of happiness, he has not attained it, though he is in the same psychological condition he would be in if he had attained it. Merely being in that psychological state is not something to which he attaches any value, and so it is odd to say that he has attained a happy life merely by being in that psychological state.²²

I think we can improve on the way extreme subjectivism describes our use of "happiness." We are not at all reluctant to say that the deceived man *feels happy* about his life. But we are quite reluctant to say that *the life he is leading is a happy life*. And we are at sea when we have to decide whether he is *happy*; the word "happiness" seems to lean in two directions, sometimes referring to the *feeling* of happiness, sometimes to the kind of *life* that is happy. For a person to be living happily, or to have a happy life, he must attain all the important things he values, or he must come reasonably close to this standard. But one can feel happy with one's life even if one comes nowhere near this goal; one need only believe that one is meeting one's standard. The deceived man, then, has a feeling of happiness, but when he is asked what he thinks happiness is, he is not being asked for the conditions under which he will have this feeling. Rather, he is being asked for his view about what a happy life is. If he discovers that his friends were deceiving him, he should say that although his feeling of happiness was based on an illusion, it really did exist. At no time, however, was he really leading a happy life.

In what follows, I will, for the sake of convenience, use the terms "happiness" and "a happy life" interchangeably. I am not

²² To vary the example somewhat: Suppose that, as a cruel trick, someone is voted the most popular student in his high school. In actuality, his fellow students can't stand him, but he is benighted enough to take the vote at face value. After a day of euphoria, he discovers that he has been tricked. Years later, he is asked what the happiest day of his life has been. If that day in high school was the one on which he felt most intensely happy, must he say that in fact it was the happiest day in his life? I think not. I can understand his saying that it was actually the unhappiest day of his life, however happy he felt. If the extreme subjectivist also wants to make this distinction between a happy day and a day on which someone feels happy, then he must explain why he does not distinguish a happy life from feeling happy with one's life. For further discussion, see n. 31.

denying that it is sometimes correct to call a person happy merely because he feels that way about his life. Aristotle never uses *eudaimonia* in this way, and in this respect his term differs markedly from our own. But once this point is made, an important question remains: What is the difference between being *eudaimon* and leading a happy life?

IV

On our view, a person is living happily only if he realizes that he is attaining the important things he values, or if he comes reasonably close to this high standard. Of course, this is not the only condition one must meet. One must also find that the things one values are genuinely rewarding, and not merely the best of a bad range of alternatives.²³ And perhaps further conditions are necessary as well. What I want to focus on is a certain subjectivism in our conception of happiness. On our view, a person is happy only if he meets the standards *he* imposes on his life. Even if many others consider his standards too low, and would never switch places with him, he can still have a happy life. Consider, for example, a person who is severely retarded and thus quite limited in his aims and abilities. Though we would never wish for such a fate, we still think that under favorable conditions such a person can lead a happy life. For he can achieve the things he values, given the right circumstances. It is irrelevant that more fortunate individuals have more ambitious goals and would not be satisfied if their achievements were so very limited.

Contrast this with a more objective way of determining whether people are leading happy lives. We can define "objectivism" as the view that people should not be considered happy

²³ "Attaining the important things one values" should not be construed narrowly, e.g., to mean that a happy person necessarily strives for future accomplishments, prizes, or successes. Happiness does not require "amounting to something," as that phrase is often used. One might attain the important things one values simply by being a certain sort of person, enjoying certain activities or relationships, and functioning in a certain way. Furthermore, to find an activity or goal "rewarding" is not merely to make an aseptic intellectual judgment that it is worthwhile. It is to be emotionally engaged in that activity, and to feel pleasure in its performance.

unless they are coming reasonably close to living the best life they are capable of. According to the objectivist, each person has certain capacities and talents which can be fully developed under ideal conditions. And if someone is very distant from his full development, he is not and should not be considered happy, even if he meets the standards he imposes on his life. For he could have been leading a much better life, as determined by some ideal standard. The objectivist thinks that it is not up to you to determine where your happiness lies; it is fixed by your nature, and your job is to discover it.

The objective conception of happiness is in some important ways modeled on Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*. He thinks that to be *eudaimon* one must completely fulfill the function of a human being, or come reasonably close to doing so. And in his opinion, most people don't know what their function is; they may not even believe that they have one. Therefore they never attain *eudaimonia*, whether they realize it or not. Now, even though the objective view of happiness is patterned after Aristotle's approach to *eudaimonia*, a modern-day objectivist need not be as narrow. The *Nicomachean Ethics* argues that there is just one life that is best for everyone—the philosophical life—but objectivists can disagree. They might believe that for each of us there is a large class of ideal lives, and that to be happy we have to come reasonably close to one of those lives. And an objectivist can also say that different types of individuals have different capacities, so that what is ideal for one person may not be ideal for another. We can think of the objectivist as a reformed Aristotelian: he wants us to make judgments of happiness in somewhat the way the *Ethics* makes judgments of *eudaimonia*, but he is free to modify Aristotle's doctrine here and there, so that his own proposal will be more reasonable.

It is important not to overestimate the differences between the subjective and objective ways of judging a person to be living happily.²⁴ The objectivist, like us, recognizes that a happy

²⁴ I will be assuming in this paper that both objectivists and subjectivists view happiness as a great good. This vague judgment, though arguable, is common in philosophy, and accurately reflects the role happiness plays in ordinary practical thought. Happiness has an important place, for example, in the ethics of philosophers as divergent as Kant and Mill. Of course, they disagree about how great a good it is; according to Mill it includes all other

person must have certain attitudes towards himself; he must be satisfied with the way his life is going, and he must find his projects fulfilling. Furthermore, we are like the objectivist in that we believe that living happily does not merely consist in having a highly positive attitude towards one's life. We agree that to lead a happy life a person must actually meet a certain standard; seeming to meet it is not enough. Finally, we resemble the objectivist in this further respect: in our assessment of how happy a person is, we take into account the extent to which he has realized his capacities. We think that if someone falls far short of developing himself, then although he may be happy, he is not as happy as he might have been. For example, even if a retarded person manages to achieve a happy life, he might have been happier had he realized to a greater degree the normal capacities of a human being. In better circumstances, he could have chosen his interests from a wider range of alternatives, and he would have found more rewarding activities for himself. Much the same can be said of normal individuals who grow up in environments that do not elicit their talents and abilities. They too might have led happier lives, though they can be successful in pursuing the things they value, and therefore be happy.²⁵

goods, whereas Kant assigns it a smaller but still significant place in our thinking. The precise value of happiness is a difficult issue which I want to avoid. It is separate from the problem of whether objective or subjective standards are more appropriate, and so in order to focus attention on this latter issue, I have objectivists and subjectivists agree roughly that happiness is a great good. Taking this as common ground, they can more easily isolate the issues that divide them. For further comments on the worth of a happy life, see n. 38. On those who deny happiness a central role in practical thought, see B. Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York, 1972), pp. 81-88. According to Aristotle, any adequate theory of *eudaimonia* must treat that end as one that cannot rationally be renounced. The *eudaimon* life, whatever it turns out to be, must be so good that no reasonable person would choose to have something else instead. (I 7 1097b14-20). Many suppose that happiness, for all its importance, does not have quite the value Aristotle attributes to *eudaimonia*. But we should not infer—as J. Ackrill does—that because of this disparity “happiness” is an unsuitable translation of Aristotle’s term *eudaimonia*. See p. 13 of his paper, cited in n. 19. Mill, as I have said, thinks it is a conceptual truth that happiness includes all other desirable goals. Yet those who deny this point can still mean the same thing he does by “happiness.” Similarly, the fact that *eudaimonia*, as Aristotle conceives it, cannot be rationally renounced hardly shows that “happiness” is a poor translation of his term.

²⁵ How are we to take the claim that although someone is leading a happy

But the objectivist says that a person is not happy if he is very distant from leading the best life he is capable of. We say instead that such a person is happy, though he might have been happier. What sort of disagreement is this, and how important is it?

V

Is the difference between subjectivism and objectivism merely verbal? Does the objectivist assign a different meaning to the word "happiness?" Should we say that he is only adopting a misleading way of talking, and that he would make his point more clearly and effectively if he used a different word instead of "happiness?" We might recommend, for example, that he express himself in this way: "A person can be happy if his life meets his own standards, but *to flourish* he must realize his capacities and come reasonably close to the best life he is capable of. So one can be happy but not flourish."

I think the objectivist has good reason to reject this proposal. He is someone who sees, in a number of cases, a huge gap between the lives people are leading and the lives that would be best for them. He may want to shock them into the realization that they are doing a terrible job with their lives. In this way perhaps they will change for the better, and at any rate others will not be tempted to imitate them. Furthermore, the objectivist may succeed in changing people's minds about whether their lives have been happy. He may convince them that their

life, he could be leading a happier one? Do such statements refer to a certain psychological state which the person is currently in, and which could be more intense in different circumstances? For example, do we mean that although the individual now has a highly positive attitude towards his life, it would have been more affirmative and enthusiastic had he chosen a different life? Sometimes this is meant, but not always. I am inclined to say that our conception of happiness, though largely subjective, nonetheless contains an objective component: Certain events—the ones that severely handicap us—are misfortunes, whatever a person's standards, attitudes or feelings. And a life afflicted by bad happenstance is, to that extent, less happy than it might otherwise have been. If a blind and a sighted person have the same positive attitude towards their existence, the latter's life is nonetheless happier, since it is not marred by serious misfortune. For further discussion, see n. 31. So subjectivism borrows from objectivism, without accepting its central idea that to live happily one must come close to one's full development.

lives have been sorely lacking in qualities whose importance they suddenly recognize. After reevaluating themselves in the light of newly acquired standards, they may thank the objectivist for making them see that they have unknowingly been leading unhappy lives.²⁶ Since such reevaluations do take place, it is hardly appropriate to tell the objectivist that he is misusing the word “happiness.” Notice too that it is not very disturbing to be told that although one is happy one could be even happier. Quite naturally, people will reply that they are satisfied just to be happy: why should they keep striving for more and more? Why should we make radical changes in our lives, as the objectivist urges, merely to exchange a happy life for a happier one? Similarly, no one is going to be upset if he is told that he is not flourishing (most people will wonder what flourishing amounts to) or fully realizing his talents. Happiness is what people want for themselves, and the objectivist is right in his conviction that people are unlikely to change drastically for their own sake unless they believe that they are not presently leading happy lives. So if we take the word “happiness” away from the objectivist, we take away a strategic tool, which he rightly insists on using.

Furthermore, the objectivist may challenge us in the following way: “As you saw earlier, a person is not leading a happy life if he falsely believes that he is achieving his most valued goals. But can’t people suffer from an illusion that is equally

²⁶ Suppose someone thinks back on an earlier period of his life, and decides that although he was achieving his goals and considered himself happy, those goals were actually worthless. Since he now deeply regrets having lived in that way, he may single out the days on which he became attracted to those empty ideals as the unhappiest days of his life. (See n. 22.) If this is a coherent way of describing those days, then it also makes sense for him to go further and to say that his life, during that whole period, was not happy. And if he does say this, his judgment cannot rely on a subjective conception of happiness. For he admits that (A) his life at that earlier time met the standards he then set, and that (B) he did have an affirmative attitude towards his existence. By subjective standards, he was then leading a happy life; the claim that he was then unhappy presupposes an objective conception of happiness. So when I say throughout this paper that our conception of happiness is subjective, I am oversimplifying. Subjectivism (with its objective component—see n. 25) is normally our view, but on occasion (e.g., in the example just presented), some of us make statements that presuppose an objective test of happiness. For another example, see n. 40.

bad for them, if not worse? They can have radically false beliefs about what goals they should pursue. If a person wants to lead the best life he is capable of, but is deeply mistaken about what this life consists in or how it is to be accomplished, then he is in as sorry a state as the man who is deceived into believing that he is loved by his friends. Both think they are leading a certain sort of life, but they are far from it, and so neither is living a happy life—though they may *feel* happy.”

We can reply to this challenge by showing what the difficulties of objectivism are, and I will be doing that in a later section. But enough has been said to show that the objectivist is not simply adopting an arbitrary and misleading way of talking. He thinks that the way we talk about happiness deceives people into leading what is, from their own point of view, the wrong kind of life. So we would be missing his point if we were to look upon his way of judging people happy to be nothing but a misuse of the word.

Nor would it be correct to say that the objectivist is proposing a new meaning for the word “happiness.” To see this, consider the following analogy: Suppose that a certain society takes tallness to be an invaluable property, though the greatest height attained is five feet. A group of scientists discovers that under optimal conditions human beings can reach a height of between five and seven feet, and they propose that steps be taken to achieve these conditions, so that young people and future generations will achieve their ideal height. To make people sense the urgent need for change, they stop calling anyone—even five-footers—tall, and they recommend that everyone else adopt this new standard. It would be a strategic mistake for them to introduce a new word to mean “attaining one’s ideal height.” Since “tallness” is already a familiar term for an esteemed property, they should simply deny what their society has affirmed: that a five-foot person is tall.

It would be wrong to say that these scientists are proposing a new meaning for the word “tall.” To be tall is to meet or exceed a specified standard of height, and the scientists are not trying to change this definition. Rather, they are proposing a different standard. They think that tallness should no longer be a matter of exceeding the norm, but of coming close to an ideal,

and there is no more a change of meaning here than in any other case in which standards for the application of a term are revised. What once passed for a good recording, for example, would no longer do so, but that hardly shows that the meaning of "good recording" has changed.²⁷

The objective conception of happiness should be treated in the same way. It proposes that we drop our current subjective standard of happiness,²⁸ and judge each person instead by a more severe and objective test. And the objectivist can reasonably argue that when he talks about a happy life, "happy" means just what it does for the subjectivist: a happy person has a highly affirmative attitude towards his life, and comes reasonably close to attaining the important things he values; a happy life, furthermore, is one that is highly desirable from the standpoint of the person leading it. But how should we characterize that standpoint? The objectivist says that a life is desirable from your own standpoint only if it comes fairly close to your ideal life, whereas the subjectivist thinks your current goals fix the standpoint from which your life should be evaluated. This difference hardly amounts to a difference in the meaning of the term "happiness."²⁹

²⁷ It might be suggested, contrary to what I claim in this paragraph, that a tall person is one who significantly exceeds the average height of individuals *currently alive*. If that is the correct definition, then the scientists in our imaginary society would be proposing a new meaning. But I doubt that this proposal captures the meaning of "tall person." Suppose we discover that ten billion human beings escaped from the earth in prehistoric times and have been living in a different galaxy. Their height varies from eight to ten feet. Are only some of them tall—the ones who exceed our newly computed average? Obviously, we would call *all* of them tall. And we would not be forced by the meaning of "tall" and "short" to consider all earthlings short.

²⁸ This is a crucial feature of objectivism, as I conceive it. It is not the mild view that on occasion we are justified in using an objective standard, and that for the most part a subjective test of happiness is legitimate. Rather, the objectivist holds that our subjective test for happiness should never be employed.

²⁹ It may help, at this point, to think about such expressions as: "that is a happy turn of phrase," "your plants are happy in that window," "my dog is happier when he's on the farm." These uses of the term "happy" are closely related to each other, and to the way "happy" is used when applied to human beings. A happy turn of phrase is one that is just right for the context in which it occurs: if a plant is happy in a sunny window, or a dog happy on a farm, that is because their needs and their environment are appropriately matched;

I think this bears on the question of how to translate Aristotle. For the objectivist wants us to use the expression “living happily” in very much the way the *Ethics* uses *eudaimonia*. As we have seen, Aristotle thinks that if someone is *eudaimon*, then he has a highly affirmative attitude towards his life, and his deepest desires are being satisfied. Aristotle differs from us only in that he thinks a *eudaimon* life must come very close to the ideal, whereas our judgments of happiness rely on a subjective standard. And as I have just argued, this sort of difference is not plausibly viewed as a difference in meaning.

VI

We can get a clearer picture of the objectivist’s proposal if we ask what it is to wish someone future happiness. More specifically, what are we wishing for when we say of a new-born baby, “I hope he has a happy life”? The subjectivist might be tempted to reply: “We are wishing the child success in attaining the things he will come to value, whatever these things are; and we are hoping he will find these goals, whatever they are, fulfilling.” But I do not think this is the right account. For think of all the terrible things that would not be excluded by the wish for happiness, if this were all it amounted to. A newborn child might become retarded—yet still live happily; he might be enslaved, or blinded, or severely incapacitated in other ways—yet still live happily. Even though these are awful misfortunes, they do not so restrict us that a happy life becomes impossible, given the subjective account of happiness. Yet when we wish a happy life to a new-born baby, we are wishing for something better than such lives as these. The child’s parents, upon hearing

and a person cannot be happy if his nature is totally unsuited for the situation in which he finds himself. In general, we speak of happiness only when there is a fit between a thing and its context. This fact is surely connected with our commonsense view that if a human being is happy then he is satisfying his major desires. Happiness requires a fit between a thing’s nature and its surroundings, and since our desires form an important part of our nature, we cannot be happy unless they are fulfilled. The objectivist goes one step further and claims that a life can be unsuitable for someone’s nature even if he satisfies his deepest desires. There is no absurdity or linguistic impropriety here.

our wishes, do not respond: "But why are you being so ungenerous? Why don't you wish our baby all the best, rather than a merely happy life? You've said nothing so far to exclude the major misfortunes—things one should not wish even upon one's enemies!"

Why don't parents make this accusation of ungenerosity? To answer this question, it will be useful to remind ourselves that there is a close linguistic connection between happiness and good fortune. "Hap" means chance; a hapless person is luckless; a happy turn of events is always good news; the first dictionary definition of "happy" is: "characterized by luck or good fortune."³⁰ I suggest that when we wish a child a life of happiness, we are tacitly relying on this connection between hap and happiness. We hope that the child will achieve the things he values, and find these things rewarding; but we also hope that the child's range of choices will not be restricted by unfortunate—that is, unhappy—circumstances. This explains why we do not react in different ways to the wish that a baby have all the best and the wish that he lead a life of happiness.³¹

³⁰ See, e.g., *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston, 1969) and *Webster's New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass., 1966), *s.v.*

³¹ I think this connection between hap and happiness sheds light on some earlier points: (A) I claimed that the deceived man is not leading a happy life (Section III); in a parallel case, I said (n. 22) that when someone looks back at a day on which he was deceived into euphoria, he could sensibly call it the unhappiest day of his life. In both cases, we take note of the individual's values (friendship, popularity) and judge him unfortunate in the light of those values. And then we justifiably slide from talk of an unfortunate person or an unfortunate day to talk of an unhappy person and an unhappy day. (B) I also said (Section IV) that if individuals live in impoverished conditions, they can be happy, though not as happy as they might otherwise have been. The connection between hap and happiness helps explain why we think this way: impoverished conditions are a misfortune, and a life lived in happier circumstances is a happier life. To say that someone might have been happier in different conditions is not always to say that a certain psychological state might have been more intense. Notice that I have left unanswered the question of what makes something a misfortune. Why, for example, is blindness an objective misfortune, as I claim in n. 25, whereas the lack of perfect pitch is not? Is it because sight is so much more valuable as a means to further practical ends? I suspect that this is not the whole story. A blind person is cut off from a significant part of the real world, and so is worse off even if his practical aims do not require vision. A philosopher who denies the reality of the physical world has less reason to consider blindness a misfortune.

As children grow up and their lives take on a definite shape, their parents and others will employ our usual subjective test for determining whether they are happy. A parent might judge that his children are very distant from the best life that was available to them, but that they are nonetheless happy. We are objective in our early hopes and subjective in our later judgments. That is, when we wish someone a happy life, we hope he comes as close as possible to one of the best lives available to him; yet later our assessments of happiness abandon any reference to an ideal. The objectivist's proposal is that we bring our judgments of happiness into line with our early wishes. He says that we should only judge a person happy if he is leading the kind of life we should have wished for him when he was a new-born baby. Some explanation is needed of why we do not adopt this practice.

Notice, by the way, how silly it would be to say that "happiness" has two different meanings: one when we wish children a happy life, and another when we assess the happiness of adults. Quite clearly what is happening is not a change in meaning but a change in standards. We include more in a happy life, when we wish it to the new-born, than we require of such a life, when we judge that someone has achieved it. All the more reason, then, to think that objectivists and subjectivists mean the same by "happiness," and that Aristotle's *eudaimon* is properly rendered, "leading a happy life."

VII

The objectivist wants us to change our linguistic habits and use his test for determining whether people are happy. To convince us, he must give us a definite idea of how to use that test. That is, he must tell us how to determine what the ideal life (or set of ideals) is for each person. We must have a fairly complete picture of what must be included in such lives and of what can safely be left out. Further, the objectivist must convince us that the lives he calls ideal really deserve that name. When people engage in the activities he calls ideal, and refrain from the ones he thinks unimportant, they must find their lives more rewarding

than they were before. Conversely, when people move away from lives the objectivist considers ideal, and try different alternatives, they must come to regret their decisions. And the objectivist ought to have some explanation of why people prefer the kind of life which he says is best for them. He must point to certain deep-seated facts of human nature and social organization which incline people to find a certain way of life best from their own point of view. Without such an explanation we may suspect that the objectivist merely has acquired a powerful hold over people who cannot consider themselves happy unless they do what he tells them. Furthermore, the objectivist must say something about what it is for a person to come *reasonably* close to leading his ideal life. Obviously, he cannot require that a happy life be absolutely perfect—there are no such lives. But unless we have some idea of what deviations from the ideal are compatible with happiness, it would be pointless to try to judge whether anyone is living happily. It would be like trying to decide whether London is reasonably close to Bristol.³²

The trouble with objectivism is that no one has worked out a detailed and plausible theory that satisfies these demands. And so even if we are attracted by the objectivist's proposal,

³² It might be thought that the subjective conception of happiness must tackle this same difficult problem. After all, it says that a happy person attains the important things he values, or *comes reasonably close* to this standard. But what is it to come reasonably close? The subjectivist, fortunately, can get himself off the hook in most cases by leaving it up to the individual to make the decision. There is no reason to establish a uniform way of measuring each person's distance from his ideal. Of course, a subjectivist cannot say that people are living happily so long as they believe they are coming reasonably close to attaining what they value. That would mean that even the deceived man is leading a happy life. But what the subjectivist can say is this: when a person has a good idea of how close he is to meeting his goals, then it is up to him to determine whether his distance from these goals is so large as to make him unhappy. What one person considers reasonably close another may not, and the subjectivist need not be bothered by this. Nor need he be disturbed by the fact that many individuals are unsure whether to call themselves happy. Though they may know how close or far they are from attaining the things they value, they may not know whether their distance from their ideals is such as to deprive them of happiness. In these cases, the individual simply has to decide whether or not he should be happy with his life. That is not something the subjectivist can decide for him. The objectivist, however, is in a more difficult position, since *he* is the one to decide *in all* cases whether a person is leading a happy life.

we have very little idea of how to put it into practice.³³ For example, suppose we read Aristotle's discussion of *eudaimonia* as a recommendation about how to determine whether people are living happily. (This is how he should be read, if *eudaimonia* means "leading a happy life.") The idea that the best life is philosophical seems much too narrow, so let us leave this aside and consider Aristotle's claim that the best life must make an excellent use of reason. Two questions arise: First, might someone make a poor use of his reasoning abilities, but make such excellent use of other capacities and talents that he comes reasonably close to leading one of the lives that could be ideal for him? Aristotle does not give any convincing reason for believing that this cannot happen. Second, there is the question of what constitutes an excellent use of reason. Here Aristotle has a lot to say. Using reason in an excellent way about practical matters requires exercising the virtues as he interprets them: one must be temperate in matters of physical pleasure, rather than a sensualist or an ascetic; one must be courageous, chiefly on the battlefield; and so on. Here too, Aristotle has worked out his theory too narrowly. There is no reason to believe that a person fully realizes his capacities only if he adopts Aristotle's attitudes towards physical pleasure and the use of force. Any objective theory of happiness which tries to do better than Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* will have to avoid his narrowness, without becoming so vague and general as to be useless.

I want to emphasize that I am making a limited point against objectivism. I do not claim that in principle such a theory can-

³³ I said earlier that when we wish a child a happy life, we are expressing the hope that he will come as close as possible to one of the best lives available to him. (See Section VI.) But now I say that we have no defensible method of determining what the class of best lives is. If this is an obstacle to making objective *judgments* of happiness, shouldn't it equally be an obstacle to making objective *wishes* for happiness? Should the subjectivist stop wishing someone all the best (i.e., wishing someone a happy life), since he doesn't know what that involves? To both of these questions, the answer is no. The fact that you can't tell whether someone will have achieved a certain goal does not argue against wishing for it. But if it is important to know whether someone has achieved that goal—and I assume we have a deep interest in knowing whether we are happy (see n. 24)—then we need a workable method for deciding when it has been attained. Our ignorance is no bar to wishing for an objectively happy life, but it does discredit our judgment that someone's life is objectively happy or unhappy.

not be found.³⁴ Great figures have claimed to see what the ideal life is for each individual, and the only rational response to these philosophies is to examine them case by case. Perhaps with more work we can provide objectivism with the philosophical foundations it requires. My point is that at present we have no defensible method for discovering each person's distance from his ideal lives. And so if we drop our subjective judgments of happiness, we have no workable and systematic alternative to put in their place.³⁵ Unless some incoherence can be found in our subjective conception of happiness—and so far none has—we have good reason to continue our present practice. Even so, our interest in the alternative provided by objectivism is bound to continue. For subjectivism says so little about how we should lead our lives: it tells us that if we want to be happy we should make up our minds about what we value most, and this is of little help to those who are uncertain about what kind of life to lead. Subjectivism requires less of a philosophical foundation than objectivism, but as a result it is, from a practical standpoint, the less informative theory.

VIII

One final complaint must be lodged against Aristotle's particular brand of objectivism: the standard by which he evaluates lives is too rigid. To see this, consider his doctrine of natural

³⁴ Here I am in disagreement with G. von Wright, as I understand him. He says, "Whether a person is happy or not depends on *his own* attitude to his circumstances of life. The supreme judge of the case *must be* the subject himself. To think that it could be otherwise is false objectivism." *The Varieties of Goodness* (New York, 1963), pp. 100-101, his emphasis. I take this to mean that our way of judging people happy cannot change so that the supreme judge of happiness becomes a wise observer, rather than the subject himself. I have been arguing that this is false, when "happy person" is equated with "person leading a happy life." If our question is, "Does this person feel happy with his life?", then von Wright is correct in saying that the supreme judge is the subject who is not deceiving himself.

³⁵ The objectivist might reply that we should abandon our subjective conception of happiness, and withhold judgments about the happiness of people's lives until we have developed a workable objective theory. But this proposal is quite weak. If we have an adequate theory, we justifiably continue to use it until a better one comes along. We don't drop it merely because a superior view might be developed.

slavery.³⁶ He thinks there are individuals who are constitutionally incapable of rational deliberation (1260a12, 1280a32–34), and for whom the best life is one of docile subordination to a wise master (1254b16–20, 1278b34–35). These natural slaves are not wholly devoid of reason (1254b22–23). Like all human beings, and unlike other animals, they are capable of emotions and desires which are persuaded and therefore altered by rational argument. But since they cannot rationally plan their lives on their own, they need to attach themselves to a benevolent superior who will regularly do this for them. If natural slaves discipline themselves so that their emotions and desires conform with their masters' correct conception of the good, they will achieve a low-grade form of virtue (1260a34–36). But even so—and this is the point I want to emphasize—Aristotle says that they can never attain *eudaimonia*, no matter how well they do within their limits (1280a33–34). Evidently, his test for *eudaimonia* is not how well one is doing, given one's limitations, but how close one comes to a perfect human life. Since the best a slave can do still falls far short of the ideal available to some, he can never be *eudaimon*. An objective theory of happiness that follows Aristotle on this point will say that a mentally retarded person can never live happily, even in the best of circumstances. Is there something wrong with this uncompromising form of objectivism?

Aristotle's inflexibility might be defended in this way: even if a slave cannot achieve *eudaimonia*, he nonetheless has every reason to try to come as near as he possibly can to that ultimate end. Certain ways of life will move him closer to this ideal and others will move him farther away, so his conception of *eudaimonia* will influence him as much as it influences those who can actually achieve it. What harm is done, then, if Aristotle's rigid standard makes the slave incapable of *eudaimonia*?

The answer is that Aristotle's inflexibility makes it difficult, if not impossible, for seriously handicapped individuals to maintain their self-esteem and vitality. On his view, only a *eudaimon* life is well lived (1095a18–20), and so slaves cannot justifiably believe that they are doing a good job of living their lives. The most favorable point they can make about their existence is

³⁶ All references in this paragraph are to the *Politics*. My interpretation follows that of W. Fortenbaugh, *Aristotle on Emotion* (London, 1975), pp. 53–55.

that among the bad lives theirs are not the worst: quite a negative judgment about the worth of being alive. Similarly, a slave is never justified in congratulating himself on the way he is living, nor can others justifiably congratulate him. For to congratulate someone on his life is to call him *eudaimon*³⁷—and the slave is utterly distant from that end. Now, just as a dedicated singer would find it hard to live with the public recognition that he sings poorly, so a person who wants to see some good in his being alive will find it hard to do so if he and others judge that his life can never be well lived. The singer, at least, can try to change his role, but one cannot turn to some other activity besides living one's life. The slave is kept going by the biological urge for survival and can develop no justified confidence that his existence is preferable to death. Aristotle himself suggests that when we ask what *eudaimonia* is, we are asking what makes life worth living, that is, what reasons there are to choose to stay alive (*Eudemian Ethics* I 5). Since the slave has such a small sampling of those goods that make life worthwhile, he can never be *eudaimon*, and can find little reason to be glad that he is alive. Aristotle's conception of self-love (*NE* IX 4) yields the same dismal conclusion: the less virtuous one is, the less one can justifiably love oneself, and so, since the slave can at best achieve a reduced form of virtue, he is entitled to little self-regard.

I suggest that there is something inhumane about Aristotle's doctrine, and that an objective theory of happiness should depart from his lead in some way. Objectivism, as I have described it, takes happiness to be a highly valuable goal, and it urges us to be dissatisfied with our lives if they are not objectively happy. But if a person is permanently handicapped, there is no reason why we should persuade him to be unhappy with his life, distant though it may be from the ideal he might have achieved. Rather, objectivism will be a more humane doctrine if it evaluates each person's life by a standard which reflects his unalterable capacities and circumstances.³⁸ What an objectivist

³⁷ This is a point made by Austin, op. cit. at n. 19, p. 280. Cf. H. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edn. (Oxford, 1940), s.v. *eudaimonisma*.

³⁸ An objectivist could choose to depart from Aristotle in a different way: he might claim that the permanent absence of happiness is a minor disadvantage, since there are many other goods. On this view, there is nothing

should say is this: Happy individuals can fall far short of the ideal they might have achieved, but they must do reasonably well with whatever restrictions currently surround their lives. A person is happy only if: (1) he meets the standards he has set for himself, and finds his life highly desirable; and (2) nothing he can now do would make his life significantly better.³⁹

Notice that the objectivist who takes this line must give up a claim made earlier, in Section VI. He said that we ought to call someone happy only if he is leading the kind of life we should have wished for him when he was a new-born baby. But what happens when a normal baby later receives severe physical injuries which cause some retardation? Humane objectivists would not have wished such a life upon this unfortunate person, but they will nonetheless judge him happy if he is doing his best under the circumstances. So flexible objectivists, no less than subjectivists, allow for a discrepancy between early wishes and later judgments. When they wish a baby a happy life, they mean to exclude certain events which, if they occur at a later time, do not prevent them from calling that life happy.

By tailoring each person's ideal to fit his current limitations, and thus departing from Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, objectivism can be a humane outlook. But its main difficulty still remains. It requires us to judge someone happy only if his

objectionable about inflexible standards of happiness, since the unavailability of happiness should mean little to us. I think, however, that this way of modifying Aristotle results in a less defensible theory. Normally we think that if a person gives up his chances to lead a happy life, he is making a great sacrifice. But if there are many other goods available to the unhappy person, has he really given up that much? The objectivist cannot easily combine these ideas: (A) a life that is not happy can still contain many good things; (B) if one's life contains many good things, then one should be happy with it; (C) if one's life is not happy, then it is inappropriate to be happy with it. Objectivism must affirm (C), and since (B) is more plausible than (A), the latter should be rejected. I see no reason why the objectivist should adopt (A) rather than the position I urge on him in the text.

³⁹ Objectivism, thus modified, claims that a person is not living happily if his conception of the good is both alterable and radically defective. For such an individual fails to satisfy condition (2). Objectivists who think that defective conceptions of the good are unchangeable—and perhaps Aristotle is one of these—might find this amended version of their theory unattractive. But I am inclined to think that we can and often do revise our notions of what is worth pursuing.

life cannot be significantly better; but we do not know how to determine this, in so many cases. Of course, all of our lives, or nearly all, could be somewhat better—but could they be significantly better?⁴⁰ To answer this question, the objectivist will have to say what the best attainable life is for each of us, and he must provide some reasonable way of measuring our distance from this reachable ideal.

To summarize, let me turn back once more to Aristotle: his differences with us stem from the fact that he calls someone *eudaimon* only if that person comes fairly close to the ideal life for all human beings, whereas our standard of happiness is more subjective and flexible. We do not have a defensible theory about which lives are ideal, and even if we did, we would not want to judge people happy only if they come close to the best life a human being can lead. So, when Aristotle says that a slave cannot be *eudaimon*, and we say that in certain conditions he can be happy, we are not, strictly speaking, contradicting each other. He is measuring the slave's distance from the ideal for all human beings, while we are saying that the slave's life can meet his own reduced standards. But even though we are

⁴⁰ There may be a few isolated cases in which we can already answer yes, without doing further philosophical work. For example, suppose sight could be restored to a certain blind person, who nonetheless willingly chooses to remain blind. Then even a subjectivist should admit that this individual's life could be significantly better, i.e., that he is far from an attainable life that is much happier. See n. 25. (I am assuming in this example that the restoration of sight would not bring with it countervailing misfortunes.) Even so, we may be reluctant to say that this person, in his blindness, is necessarily leading an unhappy life. For in so many other cases, we justifiably use a subjective standard of happiness, and this blind man may in fact meet that standard. Wouldn't we be picking on him, if we switched to an objective test and denied him the happiness we attribute to others on subjective grounds? Looking at the matter in this way, it may seem that objectivism has to work in a great many cases, or it won't work at all. But the point is debatable. We could also say that this blind man ought to be made dissatisfied with his present life, since a much better one is available. Why should we encourage him in his error by agreeing that his life is happy? Objectivism is supposed to help people view their lives correctly, and surely we are allowed to help a few even though we can't help everyone. On this view, there is nothing wrong with piecemeal objectivism. I am unable to decide between these two alternatives. But notice that even piecemeal objectivism, since it accepts subjective standards in many cases, is a far cry from the objective conception of happiness discussed throughout this paper. See n. 28.

not contradicting Aristotle on this point, we still have something to argue about. He would accuse us, and we should accuse him, of measuring people's lives by an inappropriate standard.⁴¹

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